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SUBJECT: SAADET PARTY PROTESTS POPE'S VISIT

This message was coordinated with Embassy Ankara.

¶1. Summary: On November 26, the Islamist Saadet (Felicity) Party organized a rally in the Sisli district of Istanbul to protest the Pope's upcoming visit to Turkey. Despite claims of hundreds of thousands of attendees on the party's website press estimates on participation varied from 20,000 to 50,000 participants. The party initially hoped to attract a million protesters. Both current Saadet leader Recai Kutan and former leader Necmettin Erbakan addressed the rally. Despite some hostile slogans and banners and the burning of both the U.S. and the Israeli flags the protest was generally peaceful. Given the possibility for additional protests during the Pope's visit to Ankara on November 28, Izmir/Ephesus on November 29 and/or Istanbul on November 29 and 30, the peaceful protest provided a useful dry run for Turkish security forces. End Summary.

¶2. The November 26th protest was the third largest protest organized by the Saadet party this year, drawing a smaller crowd than earlier rallies protesting the Israeli action in Lebanon and the Danish cartoons. The November 26th rally was covered by the international press as well as local press, with Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya providing live coverage. Turkish newspapers on November 27 noted the rally's smaller than expected size, as well as the Pope's statements on Sunday at the Vatican, the foreign press attention to the visit and the possibility of PM Erdogan holding a meeting with the Pope at the airport.

¶3. In his speech, Saadet Party leader Recai Kutan argued that the Pope should not come to Turkey and suggested that the Hagia Sofia -- first a Byzantine church, then a mosque and now a museum -- should be turned back into a mosque. Kutan also claimed that the Pope's remarks in Regensburg, Germany were "just more proof that Turkey could not join the EU." In a short speech by video link former Saadet leader Necmettin Erbakan claimed that the Pope was coming to Turkey to "revive Byzantium by emphasizing the ecumenical nature of the Greek Orthodox church."

¶4. Although the rally was generally peaceful, protesters shouted hostile slogans, including "Istanbul Will be the Grave for the Pope." Party organizers attempted to control the message and worked with police to confiscate unauthorized banners. Banners, some of which were in English, had to be approved in advance by organizers and the police collected unauthorized banners as protesters entered the square. The most common slogans were "Say No to the Crusader Alliance" and "The Pope Should Not Come". Some banners included pejorative depictions of the Pope and Ecumenical Patriarch as entwined snakes referring to another common slogan, "Don't Let The Ignorant and Sneaking Pope Come." A small group burned Israeli and American flags, a typical scene at Islamist protests in Turkey.

¶5. The Consul General received an official invitation to the rally from Osman Yumokullar, Saadet Party Istanbul Provincial Director. The invitation letter read "We would have welcomed the Pope if he hadn't slandered Turkey. However, he broke our hearts when he did not apologize for what he said. We wish to protest his visit. We will meet and demonstrate with the slogan of "Don't Let The Pope Come to Turkey" on November 26 at 12:00 in Caglayan. By this movement we will reply to his and the Ecumenical Patriarch's slanders and their plan for Istanbul. We'd be honored to see you among us during this demonstration." The Consulate General did not send an official observer to the rally.

¶6. Further demonstrations are expected during the Pope's four-day visit to Turkey. With more than 3,000 journalists seeking accreditation, media coverage will be abundant and irresistible to those playing to a wider audience. The November 26 protest served as a dry-run, especially for Turkish security officials, of the main events, which start tomorrow.

JONES